



# Explorers Guide to Korean Literature

READER!



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# INTRODUCTION

The works in the PDFs are representative of the colonial, separation, miracle, and post-modern eras. They are not necessarily the best examples, but they fit the 10 Magazine book club as they are short ;-), available in PDF, and not oppressively unhappy. The last point is important, since a lot of Korean literature is a bit of a downer.^^

So, with no more palaver, here are the works, and how they fit in to the overall scheme of modern Korean fiction (much more detail will be revealed at the lecture, and a handy-dandy booklet will be available for those who learn by reading).

## **• COLONIAL ERA 1905-1945**

### **A Society That Drives You to Drink**

NOT a PDF and can be found on the amazing Brother Anthony of Taize's Korean literature site.

## **• SEPARATION 1945-1965**

The Crane, by Hwang Sun-won (one of the very greatest Korean authors that you can find in translation) is very short and very friendly compared to most pundan munhak but in a very brief space it outlines how the separation of the nation meant the separation of everything that is meaningful.

## **• MIRACLE 1965 - 1997**

**The City of Machines** is a short piece by Cho Se-hui that discusses the first costs of the miracle, the massive displacement of people and society. It is from his larger story, **The Dwarf**, which is a *yŏnjak sosŏl* (linked novel) or collection of separately published short stories which can stand alone or supplement each other.

## **• POSTMODERN 1997 - Present**

**Whatever Happened to the Guy in the Elevator** is here to reflect post-modern fiction. In terms of Kim Young-ha, and postmodern literature in general, it is rather friendly and amusing. Much of postmodern literature followed along the vibe of **Seoul, Winter 1964** and **City of Machines**.

**A Society That Drives You to Drink** is the story of a man, and woman, trapped in a colonial web. Educated in Japan, but as Koreans without a position in the colonial apparatus, intellectuals are forced to fight among themselves for the social scraps that are available.

**A Society That Drives You to Drink**  
**HYON CHIN-GON**

"Aya!" Scowling, she interrupted her solitary sewing with this weak outcry. The needle had stabbed beneath her left thumbnail. Her thumb trembled faintly and cherry-red blood appeared beneath the white nail. She quickly extracted the needle and pressed down on the wound with her other thumb. At the same time, she gingerly pushed the sewing down into her lap with her elbow. Then she let up on her thumb. The area showed no color; perhaps the bleeding had stopped. But then from beneath the pallid skin the crimson oozed forth once again in a flowery network and a drop of blood no larger than a millet grain welled up, barely visible, from the wound. Nothing to do but press down once more. Again the bleeding seemed almost stanching, but if she relaxed the pressure it soon resumed.

She would have to bandage the wound. Pressing down on her thumb, she looked into her wicker sewing basket. A scrap of cloth suitable for the purpose lay beneath a spool of thread. She pushed the spool aside and tried to take the cloth between her little fingers. But it remained caught beneath two the spool, as if glued there, and for all the world she couldn't grasp it. The two fingers could only scrape helplessly against the cloth.

"Why can't I pick you up!" she finally cried, on the verge of tears. And then she glanced about the room, as if looking for someone who could help. But no one was there except, perhaps, for phantasms of her own making. Outside it was dead still but for the dreary, steady drip of water from the faucet. Suddenly the electric light seemed to brighten. It glinted from the glass face of the wall clock, and the hour hand, pointing at one o'clock, glared menacingly at her. Her husband still hadn't returned.

She could scarcely believe they'd been married seven or eight years already. But if she were to calculate the time they'd actually spent together, it might not amount to a single year. For as soon as they had married, upon his completing high school in Seoul, he had gone to Tokyo to study. And there he had graduated from college. How anxious, how lonesome she had been during that long period! In spring she would breathe in the scent of the laughing flowers, in winter hot tears would cover her icy pillow. How she missed him the times her body ached, the times her soul despaired! But all this she endured stoically, indeed welcomed. For one day he would return. This thought consoled her, gave her courage.

What was her husband doing in Tokyo? Well, he was studying. But what did that mean? She wasn't really sure. Nor did she need to bother herself to learn. Whatever it was, it was supposed to be the best, the most valuable thing in the world. It was like the goblin's spiked club that granted all wishes, as related in that tale from the old days: if he wished for clothing, then clothing would appear; and the same with food, money.... Her husband could wish for anything-no request was impossible-and he would return with it from Tokyo. Occasionally she saw his relatives wearing silk clothing and gold rings. It was an eye-opening sight, one that made her envy them

deep down inside, but later she would think, "When my husband returns!..." And she would cast a look of contempt at these luxuries.

Finally he was home for good. A month passed, and then another. But his activities seemed inconsistent with her expectations. He was no different from those who hadn't studied. Well, actually there was a difference: others made money; her husband, though, spent money, his family's money. It seemed like he was always gadding about somewhere. And when he did stay at home he was usually lost in a book or else he was up half the night writing something.

That must be how you make the magic club-this was how she interpreted it.

A couple of more months passed. Her husband's work seemed unchanged. The only obvious difference from before was that he now and then heaved a great sigh. And his face was all tensed up, as if something was troubling him. His body seemed to droop more with each passing day.

What's bothering him? his wife wondered. And she too grew troubled. She made various attempts to restore what was wasting away. She tried as best she could to add tasty dishes to his meals, and she made things such as oxtail soup. But it was all in vain. Her husband took little food, saying he had no appetite.

Several more months passed. Now he was always at home. And he was so irritable. He kept saying he was aggravated.

Once, as dawn was approaching, she half awoke and groped for him. But all she clutched was the flap of his quilt. Sleepy though she was, she felt a pang of disappointment. She opened her drowsy eyes, as if looking for something she had lost. There sat her husband, head down on his desk and clasped between his hands. As the haze lifted from her mind, she realized his shoulders were heaving. He was sobbing. The sound echoed in her ears. Instantly her mind cleared and she sat up. She went to his side and gently patted him on the back.

"What's the matter, dear?" she asked in a pinched tone.

But he said not a word.

She reached for his face and felt warm tears.

Another month or two passed. Her husband frequently went out again, as he had upon returning from Tokyo. When he finally came home late at night, his breath stank of liquor. This was a recent development.

And on this particular night, he still hadn't returned. From early in the evening she had entertained all sorts of wild thoughts as she awaited him impatiently. To speed up the tedious passage of time, she had resumed her sewing. But even this work hadn't gone as she had wanted. Now and then her needle had gone astray, and finally she had pricked her thumb.

"Where could he be all this time!"

In her annoyance, she forgot the stinging sensation in her thumb. For an instant, the images and fantasies she had been entertaining once again surfaced in her mind. Dishes of tasty food on a white tablecloth embroidered with rare and wonderful flowers flashed before her eyes. And then a scene in which several of his friends

offered each other drinks and gulped them down. The disgusting spectacle of some kisaeng bitch enticing her husband with a flirtatious smile. Her husband chuckling like a moron. And then, all of it disappearing, as if behind a black curtain, and in their place a meal table in disarray; bright light glancing off liquor bottles; that kisaeng girl, one arm propping herself up on the floor, doubled up and almost choking on her laughter. And finally there appeared her husband sprawled in the street, weeping.

Suddenly the gate rattled and a thick voice cried out: "Open up!"

"I'm coming!" she blurted, and out she went to the veranda. Her slippers, put on too hastily, scuffed along as she rushed across the courtyard. The inner gate wasn't yet bolted for the night, and the servants in their quarters beside it were always fast asleep by then, so she hurried to the outer gate herself. Her slender hand, white in the darkness, took the bolt and worked at it. The gate opened.

The chill of the nighttime breeze settled against her face. No one was there! Not a single human shadow to be seen. Only the deep blue night shrouding the faint white of the alleyway.

She lingered, a look of astonishment on her face. And then she hurriedly shut the gate, as if to prevent a devil from entering.

So it was the wind, she told herself as she caressed her cool cheeks. With a sheepish grin she retraced her steps.

But I'm sure I heard him.... Maybe I just didn't see him.... I wonder if he was lying on the ground where I couldn't see him....

These thoughts brought her to a stop at the inner gate.

Maybe I'll take another look.... No, no, no, it was all in my head.... But what if...? No, no, no, it was all in my head.

Vacillating like this, she reached the veranda, like someone sleepwalking. And then the queerest thought flashed through her mind: Do you suppose he came in without my noticing him?

Sure enough, she thought she heard sounds coming from their room. Surely someone was moving about in there. Like a child about to catch a scolding from a grownup, she tiptoed to the door. Reaching toward the threshold, she smiled in spite of herself; it was the smile of a child asking forgiveness for a mistake. Ever so carefully she opened the door. The quilt seemed to be moving.

Look at him, all wrapped up, trying to fool me, she told herself. She sat down and kept still, as if sensing something awful might happen if she touched the quilt. But finally she lifted it. The white sleeping mat was all she saw.

"What! He's not back?" she cried out tearfully. She seemed finally to have accepted the fact.

It was well past two in the morning when he returned. There was a thud, followed immediately by someone calling "Missus! Oh Missus!" She awakened thinking she was still sitting up, but found herself sprawled on the quilt. So sound asleep had she been that the elderly maid, herself a heavy sleeper, had had to open the outer gate.

Then and there the wife's dreamy wanderings came to an end and she gathered her wits. She rubbed her face once or twice and was out the door.

Her husband lay on his side on the veranda, a leg hanging over the edge, head nestled in the crook of his arm. His breathing was raspy.

The old maid yanked his shoes off, then stood up, a scowl furrowing her swarthy face.

"Come, sir, get up and go inside, please."

Barely able to move his tongue, he mouthed an answer: "All right." But he didn't budge. The lids of his vacant, sleepy eyes gently drooped.

His wife rubbed her eyes.

"Come, sir, get up," said the maid. "Go on inside now, please."

This time there wasn't an answer. Instead he reached out a hand. "Water, water-cold water," he mumbled.

The maid quickly poured water in a bowl and thrust it beneath the nose of the hopelessly drunken man. But he made no effort to drink it. It was as if he had forgotten his own request.

"Won't you drink, sir?" the maid reminded him.

"Mmm, all right," he said. Finally he propped himself up on one arm and lifted his head. The bowl was emptied in a gulp. Again he slumped down.

"Oh bother! There he goes again."

The maid reached out as if to rescue a child about to topple into a well.

"That's enough-you can go back to bed," said the husband in a vexed tone.

The wife too, standing uncertainly, wished the maid would leave. She was eager to take hold of her husband and help him up, but felt incapable of doing any such thing with the old woman watching. Although they'd been married seven or eight years now, in terms of the time they'd been together she was still a newlywed.

"Go back to bed"-these words, intended for the maid, died on her lips. If only the old woman would go inside.

But the maid had different ideas. "Let me help you up." Forcing a smile, she stubbornly stepped up onto the veranda. She seemed to take it as her proper duty that she must carry the master to his room when he had had too much to drink.

"Come now, come on," she said, giggling and looking up at the mistress. She placed a hand against the small of his back.

"All right, all right, I'll get up."

He stirred, and sure enough he slowly rose. He clomped unsteadily across the veranda toward the room, threatening to topple over at any second. He slid the door open with a bang, then went inside. His wife followed. The maid, after tsk-tsking at the threshold of the inner gate, disappeared whence she had come.

The husband stood crookedly, like someone leaning against a wall. His head drooped, as if he were pondering something.

Anxiously observing the throbbing veins of his bony temples, his wife approached. She took his suit jacket collar with one hand and his sleeve with the other.

"All right, let's take your jacket off," she said in a gentle voice.

Suddenly he slid down the wall to the floor, almost knocking her over in the process. There he sat, outstretched legs pushing away the edge of the quilt.

"Why are you acting like this? I ask you to take off your jacket and you won't do it," she cried out plaintively. Sitting down herself, she again took hold of his jacket. "It's getting wrinkled-will you please take it off?" But with the drunken man glued to the wall like a dead weight, it proved impossible. After a prolonged effort she let go and sank back.

"Good lord," she said in vexation. "Who in the world is making you drink like this?"

"Is someone making me? Hah!" Apparently the question was not to his liking. Even so, he repeated it: "Was someone making me?" Then he said, "Would you kindly find out who it was that made me drink?" He guffawed. But it was a hollow, despairing laugh.

His wife laughed with him, then took hold of his jacket again.

"Come on now, off with your clothes. We can save the talk for later. Get a good night's sleep, and tomorrow morning I'll talk with you."

"What do you mean? Why put off today's business till tomorrow? If there's something to say, then let's come out with it!"

"Yakchu's made you drunk now, but tomorrow you'll be clear-headed."

"What? Yakchu's made me drunk?" He wagged his head back and forth. "No. No one's drunk. I'm just acting up. I feel bright and sober now. Just the frame of mind for talking...any kind of talk...so out with it."

"Well, all right. Why is it you drink yakchu, when it doesn't agree with you? Look at what it does to you," she said, mopping the cold sweat from his forehead.

The drunken man shook his head.

"Uh-uh, no, that's not what I expected to hear." He fell silent, then seemed to recall what had been said a short time earlier. "That's right-you were asking if someone was making me drink? Or if I drank because I wanted to?"

"No, you don't drink because you want to. Shall I tell who or what I think is driving you to drink? Well...first of all I thought it was anger that drove you to drink, and second, maybe the fashionable people drove you to drink." She produced a gentle smile. Looks like I hit the mark, she seemed to be saying.

Her husband smiled bitterly.

"Afraid not. You thought wrong. Anger didn't drive me to drink, and it wasn't the dandies either. It was something else. You worry that I'm obsessed with the dandies, that they're always driving me to drink. Well, it's a needless worry. I don't have any



use for the dandies. The only thing that's useful to me is booze. Booze swirls around in my guts and makes me forget-that's the only thing I get out of it." Suddenly his tone changed, and he said with deep emotion, "What is it that makes a man paralyze a capable and promising mind with alcohol?"

He heaved a great sigh, sending a sour liquor smell throughout the room.

These words were difficult for his wife to understand. She remained silent, mouth clamped shut. She felt as if an invisible wall separated them. This was the bitter experience she had whenever she and her husband engaged in a drawn-out discussion; it had happened quite a few times.

Her husband smiled helplessly.

"Here we go again," he snorted. "You don't understand, do you? I shouldn't have asked you in the first place. Of course you don't understand. I'll try to explain. Now listen carefully. What's driving me to drink isn't anger and it isn't the dandies. It's this society-our Korean society-that drives me to drink. It's my good fate to have been born in Korea-if I'd been born in another country, would I be able to get booze?..."

What did he mean by society? His wife still didn't understand. At any rate, it must be some drinking establishment or something uniquely Korean that you wouldn't find in any other country.

"You don't have to visit that 'society' place every day, even though it's in Korea."

Her husband produced another grim smile. And then he said in a tone so clear he truly seemed unaffected by alcohol:

"It's so damned frustrating. When you're a member of that society it doesn't matter if you visit it or not. You think I'm driven to drink only when I go out, but I won't be driven to drink if I'm home? No, it's not like that. And it's not as if someone from our society is out there waiting for me to come out, so he can latch onto me and pour drinks down me.... How can I put it?... This society that we Koreans have established can't help but drive me to drink.... How so? I'll tell you. Let's suppose we organize a club. Now the fellows that get together in this club-to hear them talk, it's the people, the society, that comes first. There isn't one of them who wouldn't give his life for that cause. And yet in just two days-you know what happens in just two days?"

He raised his voice a notch and counted off one and then two on his fingers.

"They argue over who gets credit, they fight over who gets what position-'I'm right, you're wrong; I've got more power than you do'-and night and day they tear into each other, they try and destroy each other. What comes of all this? What's accomplished? And it's not just clubs that are like this-it's companies, it's associations, everything.... All the groups we lowly Koreans have organized are fragments of this society and they are all alike. What's there to do in a society like that? The fellow who tries to do something is a fool. The fellow who has his wits about him throws up blood and dies-nothing he can do about it. And if he doesn't die, then he's left with absolutely nothing but booze. There was a time when I decided to do something, and I gave it a try. It all went up in smoke. I was a fool.... I don't drink because I want to. These days I'm used to booze, but when I was first drinking, I practically killed myself-remember? A person who hasn't gone through the suffering of being drunk can't possibly understand. The splitting headache, the

stuff you drank coming back up.... Even so, it's better than not drinking, because you're not suffering mentally even though you're hurting physically. The only thing you can do in this society is be a lush...."

"Please don't talk like that. Surely you can be something better than a lush!"

She blurted this out in agitation, gazing at her husband with feverish eyes. In those eyes, her husband was the most divine man in the world. Accordingly she had believed he would turn out better than anyone else. She knew, though only dimly, that his goals were far-sighted and high-minded. He had been a gentle man, and she realized vaguely that turning to drink was not something he had wanted but rather a means of venting his anger. He couldn't keep drinking forever, though. Else he would end up ruining both himself and his family. And so she couldn't help wishing she could dissipate his anger as quickly as possible, so that he'd return to his old gentle self. And she was sure this would happen someday. Starting today, starting tomorrow.... But the previous day he had gotten drunk. And he was in the same condition today. Each passing day proved her expectations more mistaken, and weakened her confidence in those expectations. Plaintive longings sometimes oppressed her, and when she saw her husband's face growing haggard, she couldn't keep such sentiments in check. And so it was hardly surprising that she'd become agitated just now.

"You just don't understand. God, what's a man to do! What I'm trying to say is, you can't stay sane and live even a day in this society. You'll throw up blood and die, or you'll throw yourself into the river and drown. You feel choked, you feel suffocated, dammit!"

Scowling in an agony of impatience, he clutched at his chest like a madman.

Ignoring him, she shouted back, her face redder, "So you drink, and you don't feel suffocated?"

Her husband looked dumbstruck at her, stunned by her words. The next instant a shadow of unspeakable distress fell over his eyes.

"I was wrong, wrong, wrong. Wrong to confide in a simpleton like you. I just wanted a bit of sympathy from you-but I was wrong," he lamented. "I'm so damn frustrated!"

Saying no more, he bolted to his feet and opened the door.

Instantly she regretted her mistake. "Why are you going out?" she said anxiously, grabbing the back of his jacket. "Where are you going at this time of night? I made a mistake. I won't talk like that again. We can talk tomorrow morning."

"I've heard enough. Let go of me. Let go!"

Pushing her away, he tottered to the edge of the veranda, slumped down, and began putting on his shoes.

She followed and took him by the arm.

"For goodness' sake, why are you doing this? I said I wouldn't talk like that again."

But he brushed her hand aside. His own hands were trembling and he seemed ready to burst into tears. "What's the matter with you? Go away!" he snapped, breaking

free. He clumped to the inner gate and was gone. The bolt on the outer gate clanged.

Left at the edge of the veranda, she called out several times for the maid, but in vain. Her husband's footsteps grew distant in the still of the darkness and finally were gone beyond the alleyway. The night wore on in desolate silence.

"He's gone...gone!" she cried while she strained to listen, as if determined never to lose the sound of his footsteps. But her voice was that of someone who had lost everything: not only the sound of his footsteps but her mind, her spirit, as well. She felt empty, body and soul. Her eyes stared blankly into the murky haze of the night, seeking the poisonous shape of that "society" her husband had spoken of.

The chill, dreary breeze of the early-morning hour raked her chest. The raw sensation brought her sleepless, tired body to the breaking point. Her face, pallid as that of a corpse, quivered and twitched.

"Why does this wicked 'society' drive him to drink?" she whispered in despair.